

The Cat Detective

by H. La Marque

Rap! rap! rap!—three in succession, quick and sharp, but no answer.

Rap! rap! rap!—still louder, yet no response.

“My boss must be uncommonly sleepy this morning,” the boy said, in half audible tone.

“He generally wakes up at my first rap; now, I have given six good ones, and not one has brought his usual morning salutation, ‘Go about your business, Phil!’ But I must wake him up anyhow, for if he sleeps beyond his usual time, they’ll be a row, and you better believe I’ll have to look sharp; so here goes again.”

The lad applied his knuckles to the door, and pounded vigorously, but failed to receive any answer.

“Something must be the matter,” he at last said. “Maybe he has a fit. I guess I had better go for assistance.”

He hastened away, and soon returned, accompanied by a policeman. After a short delay the door was forced open, and the two entered the apartment. At first nothing was discernable, as the blinds were tightly closed and the room very dark.

Phil felt his way carefully toward the nearest window, and more than once his foot slipped as he trod on some wet substance on the floor. When at last he had opened a blind, and thrown some light into the room, a terrible spectacle presented itself. Old Mr. Lester was lying face downward in a pool of his own blood, while a terrible wound in his back, and several gashes on his head showed plainly that a most foul murder had been committed.

For several minutes the two spectators stood silent, gazing on the dreadful scene. A faint mew aroused them, and Phil said under his breath:

“That’s old Lucy. She must have seen the master murdered, for she always sleeps on the foot of his bed. If she could only speak now, she would tell us everything she saw. Here, puss, puss!” but puss did not come as usual at the summons.

Looking carefully around the room he espied her crouching down under the side window. He went to her and tried to take her up but although a very gentle cat hitherto she turned fiercely on him and bit him severely.

“Best let her alone,” the policeman said. “She seems mad with fear. We shall have to shoot her, I fear.”

“Oh, no, don’t,” Phil said. “She was master’s pet. Let’s leave her alone a little while.” He rose from his stooping posture, but as he did so he glanced down at the cat’s fore paws, and saw that they were all bloody. “Poor pussy!” he said, sympathy for the animal overcoming his fear.

Pussy advanced slowly toward him, and revealed a bloody dagger lying on the floor, over which she had been crouching. The policeman picked it up.

“Ah,” said he, “that may prove a clew.”

Pussy’s paws were found uninjured, but nothing could induce her to leave the room.

“You must run to the nearest station and notify them of the murder,” the man said, “I will remain here until you return.”

In a few hours every one in B—— had heard of the murder, and crowds were collected around the house. A jury was soon empanelled, and after a careful examination of the body, a verdict was returned that the deceased met his death by stabs from a dagger in the hands of some unknown person.

The body was then laid out, and leaving a watch behind, the jury departed, as wise as when they first entered the premises.

In due time the funeral took place, and was largely attended, for Mr. Lester, though very eccentric, had, nevertheless, many friends among both rich and poor. For nearly twenty years he had lived and practiced law in B——, his office being situated in the business part of the town. About a year before the commencement of our story he had taken into his employ a youth of fifteen, an entire stranger. He found him wandering about with some gypsies, and noticed that he did not belong to the band. The boy gladly accepted Mr. Lester’s offer to leave his roving companions. He said his name was Philip Gardner, and that his parents were both dead. He had joined the gypsies because he could get no work, and anything was better than starving. Since that time he had served faithfully, and though Mr. Lester was very strict, and scarcely ever praised him, still he was just, and increased his wages as the boy became more and more valuable to him, until at his death he was paying him eight dollars a week.

Phil was a handsome lad, with large, dark brown eyes and curly hair, and very gentlemanly in his ways. But somehow Mr. Lester’s clients, one and all, distrusted him, and he had no friend in the city but his master.

Who could have committed so cowardly a murder was a mystery to be solved, and every effort was made, both by the police and private citizens, to discover the murderer, and large rewards were offered, but without success. The assassin had covered his tracks so well as to baffle the keenest detective on the force. All that the most diligent investigation could discover was that the murder had not been committed for plunder, as nothing was

missing, either of money or other valuables, for the safe, and the massive gold watch and chain always worn by the deceased, as well as his studs and sleeve buttons, pocket-book, were found on his person. Only a small package of papers were discovered by the boy to have been taken.

About a week after Mr. Lester's funeral, a stranger presented himself at the office of the lawyer who had taken charge of the effects of the deceased, and claimed to be his nearest kinsman, and so entitled to succeed to his property. He was [a] tall, handsome young man of some twenty-five years, and he brought well-authorized proofs that he was the nephew of the late Mr. Lester, being the only son of his brother. Among other proofs was a letter he had received from his uncle a few days before his death. In this letter he begs his nephew to come to him immediately, giving as a reason for thus urging him, that he had a strange presentiment that his death was near. He implored him to come to him as soon as possible, if he wished to see him alive again.

"I was from home when the letter arrived," the young man said; "but as soon as I read the account of my uncle's murder in the papers, I hastened back. I was deeply grieved, when I read his letter, that I had not received it in time to go to him; as I might have been able to save his life. I was always his favorite, principally because I was named for him, and Mr. Lester has always been a good friend to me. I shall never rest contented until his murderer is discovered and brought to justice."

When asked by the lawyer if he had any idea who it was that committed the deed, he replied that he had strong suspicions, but thought it best for the present to keep them to himself, as he had no direct proofs.

As no objection could be made by the lawyer, Alfred Lester took possession of his uncle's property, by virtue of a will found in his safe.

His profession being the same, he retained the same rooms, and before he had been many months in B——, nearly all the late Mr. Lester's clients had placed their business in his hands. The rooms he occupied were three in number, being the whole first floor. The front one had been used as an office by his uncle, and the back as a bedroom, the small room between he had used as a dining-room and private office.

Meanwhile, the cat, which had received the uncommon name of Lucifer from his late master, refused to leave the room where the murder had been committed. She had become gentle again, but no inducement could persuade her to remain away more than a few minutes at a time. She would not take her meals there, but as soon as the cravings of hunger were satisfied, she would return and crouch down in the same place under the side window. For a time the murder and the strange behavior of the cat attracted the attention of the public; but as no discoveries were made to lead to the detection of the criminal, the affair ceased, in time, to be talked of, and other exciting events occurring, soon buried it in oblivion.

Alfred Lester had taken his uncle's place but little over six months, when suddenly a cloud arose on his horizon. Whence it came he could not tell; but all at once he found his clients leaving him; and when by chance he met any of them on the street, he was surprised to find himself passed by without scarcely a nod of recognition. He was conscious of no action on his part to cause this state of affairs, and he called on several of his friends, but failed to obtain any satisfaction from them—they did not even make the slightest excuse for taking their business out of his hands.

Alfred Lester was not dependent on the law for a living, as he had property of his own besides that left him by his uncle. He had taken a deep interest in young Phil, whom he had retained in his office; and he now determined to adopt him, and educate him as his own son, and thus occupy his leisure moments.

One day in June, nearly a year from the [murder], Phil rushed suddenly into the room formerly used as an office, his face flushed and one eye looking rather blacker than was natural.

"Uncle," he said, as soon as he could get his breath, for so Mr. Lester requested him to call him, "don't blame me, I've been fighting I won't deny it, but I could not help it, and I've given the fellow the biggest thrashing he ever had in his life. I guess he won't come to me with any more of his nonsense."

"What nonsense? Phil, surely you didn't fight a boy for talking nonsense? I am afraid if I was to follow your example, [a] certain boy I could name would get a good many thrashings. What did the youth say that compelled you to use him so roughly?"

"Oh, uncle I am so sorry I said anything about it, I wouldn't if I hadn't got this black eye. Please don't ask me any questions."

"But I must know, Phil," Alfred Lester said, in a firm, determined tone. "I have known for several months that some rumors concerning me were in circulation, but I could never discover what they were—now, you must tell me." For some time he had to urge the boy before he was able to get a word from him. At last, in a voice broken by sobs, he had told how a fellow with whom he—Phil—had refused to associate had said he needn't hold his head so high, for if his new boss hadn't killed his old one, he would still be nothing but an office boy."

"But I pounded him well," Phil said, as if that was some satisfaction to his injured feelings.

Alfred Lester remained silent for some time. This, then, was the cloud that had obscured his prospects. The loss of his business did not give him a moment's uneasiness, but the idea that he should have been suspected of murdering his good kind uncle was more than he could bear. He dismissed Phil, saying he wished to be alone, and when the door closed on the boy he locked it, and gave himself up to mingled feelings of grief and despair. For hours he walked the floor, and refused all offers of food. At last, toward night, Phil's

voice calling him through the keyhole in the tones of such deep grief, aroused them, and he opened the door. Phil could scarcely believe his eyes when he gazed on Mr. Lester. He seemed at least ten years older, and his stately form was bowed as if by age.

He threw himself into the easy chair by the table, and made an effort to eat the tea and toast Phil had brought in, but food [seemed] to choke him, and he could only drink the tea.

“You must go to bed, my boy,” he said, as he put down his cup. “I will retire soon. Don’t feel uneasy about me; I shall be all right in the morning. You did not believe what the fellow said, did you, Phil?”

“Oh, uncle, what a question! You know I did not. I would not believe it if the whole world said so,” the boy said, in an injured tone of voice.

“Why pussy knows better, and if she could only speak, she would say so.”

“Forgive me, my boy,” Mr. Lester said, “and now good night—it is nearly midnight.”

But the cat made herself known by jumping up into the young man’s lap, and rubbing herself softly against his arm, purring all the time.

“See, uncle, Lucy is on your side,” Phil said. “Don’t be discouraged—all will come right at last.”

“I hope so, Phil, I hope so.” was Mr. Lester’s answer.

A day or two afterward Phil noticed a stranger closely examining their house and on being detected he walked hastily away.

As the building was old, and rather of a curiosity, the boy did not attach much importance to this, and said nothing to Mr. Lester about it, even though he chanced to see the same stranger several times near his home.

At last the anniversary of the murder came around. Alfred remained in his room all day, but in the evening he admitted Philip, and conversed long with him about his future prospects.

“I feel a presentment,” he said, “that something will happen to me before long, and I want to prepare you for it.”

At ten o’clock he sent him to bed. Phil went up to his own pleasant room, for since his adoption he had occupied the front chamber over his uncle’s office.

He threw himself on the bed without undressing, and soon fell asleep. He was aroused by a strange cry like that of an enraged beast. He listened, and again the cry sounded louder than before.

The clock struck the hour of midnight, and Phil, now thoroughly aroused, and trembling from head to foot, hastily lighted his lamp, and prepared to descend, to find out the meaning of the cry he had heard. On the top step of the stairs he paused.

“What if there are robbers?” he said. “I cannot do much alone.”

He hurried up stairs, where two laboring men were sleeping, and awoke them. Soon all three were at Mr. Lester’s door. A low growling and deep groans were all they heard. Breaking open the door, they advanced into the room. On the floor, in front of the side window, was extended a man, slowly bleeding to death from a severe wound in the throat, which had nearly severed his jugular vein. By his side, with her fore-paws on his chest, was the cat who had inflicted the wound, and who now crouched down watching his every movement, and ready to spring again at his throat should he try to escape.

Alfred Lester was lying back in his chair, stunned from a severe blow on the head. He was soon restored to consciousness, but even he could not explain the situation. The last he remembered was dozing in his chair, and being aroused by some one entering his room through the window. He tried to call for help, but received the blow which rendered him senseless. The last sound he heard was the enraged cry of the cat.

One of the men who had gone out soon returned with an officer, and the wounded man was attended to. It was unnecessary to bind him, as he was too far gone to give any trouble. With some difficulty the cat was removed from his chest and his wounds dressed. He gazed around him and seeing that he had failed in his murderous designs, seemed satisfied.

“I murdered the uncle,” he said, in a hoarse tone; “I would have murdered the nephew, then all would have been mine.”

He gasped for breath, a stream of blood flowed from his mouth, and in a moment later he was a corpse.

When the news of this extraordinary occurrence was published, Alfred Lester’s friends, one and all, apologized to him for their treatment, and asked him to open business again. He declined, and soon after left B——, with his adopted nephew, and returned to his mother’s house to live.

Here a new surprise awaited him, for Mrs. Lester, after closely questioning Phil, discovered that he was her grandson, his mother being an older daughter, who, having married against her parents’ wishes, went away and had never been heard from. A picture which Phil had of his mother supplied the missing link, and settled the matter beyond question.

The cat, that had finally avenged her master's death; was found a few days after, lying dead on his grave.

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